

# *Virginia Resolutions on State Debts*

Patrick Henry



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## **OVERVIEW**

Congress adopted Alexander Hamilton's financial plan—the Report on the Public Credit—in 1790. Many people objected to it, though. Patrick Henry drew up the following protest for the Virginia Assembly in 1790.

**GUIDED READING** As you read, consider the following questions:

- What is Henry's main objection to Hamilton's plan regarding the assumption of public debts?
  - What action does Henry request?
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**T**he General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia to the United States in Congress assembled.

Represent,

That it is with great concern they find themselves compelled, from a sense of duty, to call the attention of Congress to an act of their last session, intituled "An act making provision for the debt of the United States," which the General Assembly conceive neither policy, justice nor the constitution warrants, Republican policy in the opinion of your memorialists could scarcely have suggested those clauses in the aforesaid act, which limit the right of the United States, in their redemption of the public debt. On the contrary they discern a striking resemblance between this system and that which was introduced into England, at the revolution; a system which has perpetuated upon that nation an enormous debt, and has moreover insinuated into the hands of the executive, an unbounded influence, which pervading every branch of the government, bears down all opposition, and daily threatens the destruction of everything that appertains to English liberty. The same causes produce the same effects! In an agricultural country like this, therefore to erect, and concentrate, and perpetuate a large monied interest, is a measure which your memorialists apprehend must in the course of human events produce one or other of two evils, the prostration of agriculture at the feet of commerce, or a change in the present form of foederal government, fatal to the existence of American liberty. . . .

During the whole discussion of the foederal constitution by the convention of Virginia, your memorialists were taught to believe "That every power not granted was retained," under this impression and upon this positive condition, declared in the instrument of ratification, the said government was adopted by the people of this Commonwealth; but your memorialists can find no clause in

the constitution authorizing Congress to assume the debts of the states! As the guardians then of the rights and interests of their constituents, as sentinels placed by them over the ministers of the foederal government, to shield it from their encroachments, or at least to sound the alarm when it is threatened with invasion, they can never reconcile it to their consciences, silently to acquiesce in a measure, which violates that hallowed maxim: a maxim on the truth and sacredness of which the foederal government depended for its adoption in this Commonwealth. But this injudicious act not only deserves the censure of the General Assembly, because it is not warranted by the constitution of the United States, but because it is repugnant to an express provision of that constitution; this provision is "That all debts contracted and engagements entered into, before the adoption of this constitution, shall be as valid against the United States under this constitution, as under the confederation," which amounts to a constitutional ratification of the contracts respecting the state debts in the situation in which they existed under the confederation, and resorting to that standard, there can be no doubt that in the present question the rights of states as contracting parties with the United States must be considered as sacred.

The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia confide so fully in the justice and wisdom of Congress upon the present occasion, as to hope that they will revise and amend the aforesaid act generally, and repeal in particular, so much of it as relates to the assumption of the state debts.